Digital Diplomacy: The Future of Foreign Policy

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Source: European Union

Introduction

The Internet revolution has affected all aspects of life, including international affairs. This revolution has also transformed diplomacy as a foreign policy tool. With more than 2 billion people using Facebook, Twitter, Qzone, Snapchat and other social media platforms daily, digital connectivity has made the world smaller and, in the process, changed the daily lives of billions of people. Now unmediated dialogue and information exchange between people from around the world occur 24 hours a day throughout the year. Although the traditional mode of conducting diplomacy, that is, interactions between representatives of sovereign states, remains crucial, in

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today's interconnected world, individuals and organizations—not just countries—play a larger role in international affairs. This has given rise to what is referred to as **digital diplomacy**. However, as noted by Bjola, despite the promises that digital diplomacy offers for the conduct of International Relations, little is known, from an analytical perspective, how digital diplomacy works, with what degree of success and what its limitations are.[2] Governments and international organizations are now realizing that social media is also a potential game changer for how international relations can be pursued. In particular, the adoption of digital diplomacy, which we broadly define as the use of social media for diplomatic purposes, could change practices of how diplomats engage in information management, public diplomacy, strategy planning, international negotiations or even crisis management. Despite the promises that digital diplomacy offers for the conduct of international relations, little is known, however, from an analytical perspective, how digital diplomacy works, with what degree of success and wherein lay its limitations.

Going forward with digital diplomacy

Diplomats have traditionally sought to influence how the media portrays events, actors and even countries, given that media shapes public opinion. MFAs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) rely on journalists and the media for information regarding events in foreign countries. Once the media migrated online, MFAs were soon to follow. The Internet affects the foreign policy as it does in every other area of government policy. Technology now controls how information flows around the globe. This has enabled the "news", the base material of foreign policy and how governments interact with each other, to become faster, more readily available, and reach almost every part of the world. These developments significantly affect the interactions of governments, which are the purpose of diplomacy. The prospect for even faster and potentially more far-reaching changes in the future will require foreign ministries to be nimble and informed in their responses.[3]

[2] Bjola, C. (2015). Introduction: Making sense of digital diplomacy. In C. Bjola & M. Holmes (Eds.), *Digital diplomacy: Theory and practice* (pp. 1–9). New York, NY: Routledge.
[3] Grant, R. (2004). The democratisation of diplomacy: Negotiating with the internet (OII Research Report No. 5). Oxford: Oxford Internet Institute.

Many countries worldwide are seizing the moment and actively pursuing their foreign policy objectives and possibilities for a positive outlook through the creation of websites, blogs and the use of social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Weibo, Flickr, Google+ and so on. The United States Department of State has been described as the vanguard of digital diplomacy, which it refers to as *21st Century Statecraft*, using new technology to engage a growing, changing set of stakeholders across the globe. The twenty-first century statecraft agenda addresses new forces propelling change in international relations that are pervasive, disruptive and difficult to predict. The distinctive features of twenty-first century statecraft point the way toward deeper changes that will gradually permeate across all of the foreign policy: expanding its scope, substituting new tools, and changing its values.[4]

Digitization of Diplomacy: New Diplomatic toolbox

The massive use of new-aged IT technologies by the global powers framing the new generation of diplomatic challenges. The emerging diplomatic challenges could be handled through the new intelligent information tools which must be the part of diplomatic toolbox. The digitalization of diplomacy is completely affected by the standard and time-related domination. The universal presence of states through social media interacts with the individuals or groups of people of social media users within the states or outside the states. The inclusion of digital platforms demands the new approach from the states globally. The unbounded and edgeless nature of online platforms pushes diplomats towards unique diplomatic challenges such as cross-border influences. Diplomacy in information era is completely mismatched from the traditional approach due to the capability of direct connection with the citizens of foreign countries. The deployment of digital diplomacy is bringing Government, Civil Society and tech giants on single platforms.

Worryingly, the Russian strategy and tactics of influencing politics in Western countries by unleashing the "firehose of falsehoods" of online disinformation, fake news, trolling, and

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[4] U.S. Department of State. (2014). 21st century statecraft: The "Internet moment" in foreign policy. Retrieved from http://www.state.gov/statecraft/overview/index.htm

conspiracy theories, has started to be imitated by other semi-authoritarian countries, such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Philippines, North Korea, China, a development which is likely to drive more and more governments to step up their law enforcement efforts and digital counter-strategies to protect themselves against the 'dark side' of digital diplomacy.[5]

Source: European Union

Benefits of digital diplomacy

Today, digital diplomacy is a foreign policy essential. The world is such that state and non-state entities all compete for influence and power in the same online space. That space now hosts more than 3 billion people, most of whom only access the internet through their mobile phone. When used properly, digital diplomacy is a persuasive and timely supplement to traditional diplomacy that can help a country advance its foreign policy goals, extend international reach,

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[5] Funke, D. & Flamini, D.(2019). *A guide to anti-misinformation actions around the world* . Poynter. Retrieved November 22, 2022, from Poynter website: https://www.poynter.org/ifcn/anti-misinformation-actions/

and influence people who will never set foot in any of the world's embassies.[6] Digital technologies can be particularly useful in public diplomacy in the field of information collection and processing, in the field of consular activities, and for communications during emergencies and disasters. International practice shows that the competent use of digital diplomacy tools can bring big dividends to those who invest in it. Moreover, digital diplomacy does not always require financial investments. On the contrary, it is often aimed at reducing costs. The human factor—the desire of employees to grow, master new technologies, spend part of their work time on working with the target Internet audience, electronic process data, and create information and reference materials—is very important. Much of the work of foreign ministries around the world continue to be managed through the normal processes of diplomacy: instructions to embassies in foreign countries; meetings and negotiations which are not in the public focus; collecting, reporting, and disseminating relevant information; patient and slow building of constituencies of interest; and the resolution of many technical issues through intergovernmental procedures, such as international conferences, international and regional organisations, or technical working groups. Thus, digital diplomacy will not replace classical diplomacy, but if handled with skill, this tool can strengthen the work of the state in international relations and foreign policy in a faster and more cost-effective way.

However, digital diplomacy has risks, including information leakage, hacking, and anonymity of Internet users. A good example of information leakage is the Wiki-leaks episodes. Hacking is another risk which has existed since the advent of the Internet. Additionally, diplomatic rivals, including both state and non-state actors (such as terrorist organizations), may try to hack into government systems and extract information of use to themselves, leading to ramifications with far reaching consequences.

Conclusion

The use of social media by diplomats has opened communication between policymakers and citizens. These tools, especially Facebook and Twitter, provide diplomatic missions with direct access to citizens inside and outside their countries. This communication often bypasses state and

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[6] Lowy Interpreter. (2015). *Does Australia do digital diplomacy?* Retrieved from
http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2015/04/17/Does-Australia-do-digital-diplomacy.aspx

media filters, potentially enabling countries to more effectively influence foreign audiences and achieve diplomatic objectives. Essentially, digital diplomacy has brought about a transformation of the conduct of traditional diplomacy. It defines changes both in the structures and processes of ministries of foreign affairs (MFAs). ICTs revolution resulted in the control of the way information flows everywhere, making the dissemination of information fast and wide, enabling people to make their own judgments, express their concerns and feelings, and even influence policymakers. Consequently, the way governments interact is faster and reaches more in almost every part of the world.